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Stress-Busting Strategies for Busy Parents

By Kay Kosak Abrams, Ph.D.

Dear Dr. Kay,

Help! Every day I am worn out and angry. My husband works round the clock and is a weekend dad. Our weekends are filled with errands and family obligations. Our third child is just beginning to crawl, and my other two are fighting constantly. We just moved into a new neighborhood, and I think my kids should be happy. My father is ill and that is adding to the stress. All day long I hear myself shouting, "If you don't..." and then threatening to take something away. My 5- and 3-year-olds hardly hear me anymore. They are out of control and rude. I feel guilty for acting like a stress monster, but I am so mad!

Dear Parent,

As parents, we make decisions about what works best for our family. Sometimes we fail to recognize how positive change, such as a new baby or moving to a new neighborhood, can take a toll on our health.

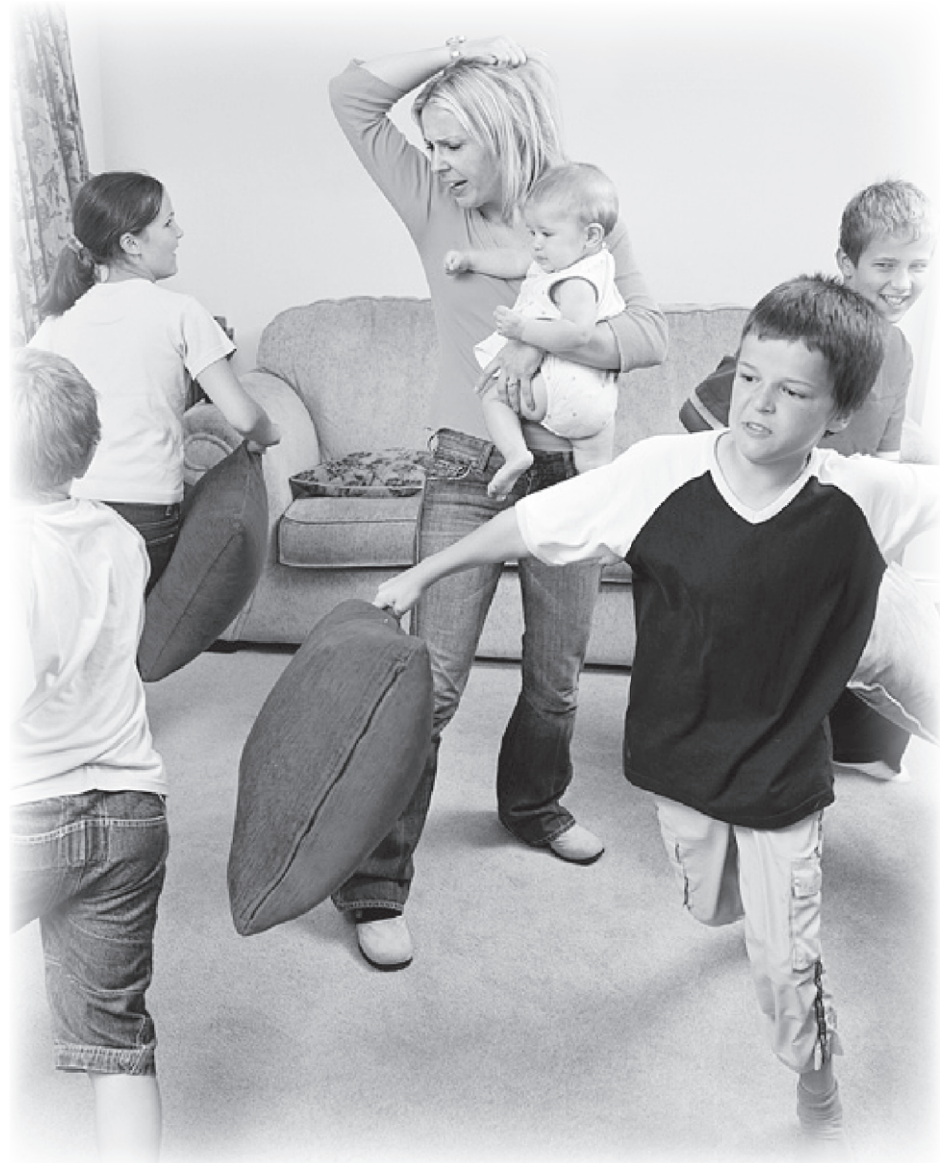
Any adjustment is stressful, and you have many stressors in your everyday life. What you may be lacking are sufficient resources to buffer yourself and your family. By building buffers to counter stress, families can better manage many challenges.

You and your husband have worked hard to provide a nice home for your children. When your kids test you and push the limits,

you find yourself reactive, throwing out empty threats that sabotage your authority. Worse, you find your children are not showing you the respect you deserve.

Moms and dads are human and can only manage so much before emotions take over reason. As parents become reactive due to stress, children can become more difficult to manage.

Resorting to screaming and yelling, or to empty threats, adds to the tension. Such tension is a sign that there are too many needs and not enough buffers. Buffers are



the behaviors you build into your everyday life that keep you going.

Without sufficient buffers to ward off the stress, families lose their equilibrium. Some stressors, like your dad's illness, are out of your control. And some, such as how many activities you schedule and the amount of hours your husband works, may be in your control. Managing stress involves adjusting our expectations and our priorities, along with finding ways to recharge.

Here are several practical suggestions to help you begin to build stress buffers in order to bring better behavior and balance back into your everyday life.

1 Take the time to think before making major decisions that will result in significant stress and needs for adjustment.

2 Try not to make too many changes at once if you have control and can pace yourself for the sake of your family.

3 Avoid keeping up with the Joneses traps, and remind yourself that your family's sanity is your top priority.

4 When stress is getting the best of you, step back and bring it down. Cut the "to do" list down by assessing the costs and benefits of each activity.

5 Every time you schedule an activity, think about finding the balance between activities and down time.

6 Try not to hover over your kids all the time. Try staying out of the conflict by encouraging them to work it out.

7 Learn to engage in active ignoring, which is not easy to do, but well worth it. You are cultivating a buffer inside yourself and demonstrating the ability to disengage and stay separate.

8 Build resources for coping with stress, such as calling upon friends for support. Eliminate or delegate tasks. Turn work around the house into a time for all to pitch in!

9 It is healthy for your children to understand that sometimes they can give something up as a way to give to the family. They can visit their sick grandpa and make cards for him.

10 When your children misbehave, learn to move it forward. It's like changing the channel, rather than getting stuck in a power struggle of threatening consequences. Simply say, "Looks like it's time to do relay races outside!" to drop the tension.

11 Moms and dads need to consider the impact of working too much on family, marriage and the mental health of their children. Research shows that presence of a father secures children emotionally and behaviorally.

12 Find time to play, laugh or share quiet time every day.

Parents can be resourceful and remain calm while managing needs and conflicts every day. This takes practice and requires time for communicating. Preventing too much stress requires some smarts about when to let go and what to give up in order to keep your balance.

Keeping our cool is all about bringing everyone in the household down a notch or two, rather than up. As you calm your nerves and bring your voice down, along with your reactivity, you can manage everyone's needs without sacrificing your sanity.

When families make choices for change, or when families are living with circumstances beyond their control, it is necessary to adjust expectations and build some relief for the stress. Misbehavior is our signal to begin to resort to activities and resources that buffer the impact of the stress. By building buffers, we build space for ourselves to be present as we care for ourselves and for each other.

Kay Kosak Abrams is a clinical psychologist in private practice. Her Parenting With Confidence Coffeehouse meets on the fourth Thursday of each month. For more information, visit her website, www.kayabrams.com.



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